THE LET-ALONE POLICY.

A Sermon,

BY

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SERMON.

Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone.—*Hosea x.* 17.

I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.—*Matthew v.* 39.

It is interesting sometimes to see how the same verbal doctrine looks from two different points of view, and how the truest doctrine may be misjudged by people taking the wrong view of it. We have here, announced by an old, and by the new prophet, a doctrine which wise and noble men broached for a wise and noble purpose, but which men foolish and ignoble have perverted to ends ignoble and foolish. It is familiarly known as the doctrine of "*laissez faire*," or, as we say in English, the doctrine of "Let us alone"—the "Let-alone Policy." Respecting this doctrine, a great deal is to be said both for and against. A great deal is to be said *for* it, as originally meant; a great deal is to be said *against* it, as vulgarly understood. The doctrine came up in Europe at a time when human nature, oppressed, beaten down, clogged, worn-out by excessive government, began to grow restless, and to protest against the tyranny of over-legislation. The world had been regulated by its rulers past all endurance, and was getting desperate under the fretting action of the

leading strings. Government had its hand in everybody's business, insisted on doing everything, and did everything badly. Government undertook to adjust prices of food, to regulate railways, to superintend house building, to fix cab fares, to inspect sewers, to vaccinate children, to send out emigrants, to prescribe hours of labor, to examine lodging-houses, provide public libraries, read and sanction plays, overhaul passenger-ships, test the knowledge of mercantile captains, see that small dwellings were supplied with water, patronize different branches of trade and manufacture; in short, to regulate endless things, from a banker's issues to the boat fares on a river. It even undertook to say for men and women how they should save their souls, what articles of religion they should believe, where and in what form they should worship, what proportion of their income they should set aside for the maintenance of the Church, for the support of charitable institutions, for the diffusion of Christianity. Men and women were scarcely permitted to do anything for their own interest or in their own way. Human nature was forbidden to work in obedience to its own divinely-appointed laws, but must stand still with clogged wheels, and be pushed this way and that by a set of state and ecclesiastical functionaries. When affairs were in this hopeless condition, Adam Smith, in the name of the people, raised the cry of "*Let us alone*," and he meant simply, "Hands off of human nature"; leave human nature free to supply her own wants, in her own way; leave God's system of checks and balances to its own operation; leave men and women at liberty to say what they need, and how they will meet their need; do not tie up a nation's hands and feet with red tape, nor throw secretaries and bureaus in the way of the people's advance. Let us at least try the experiment of managing our own affairs. This was the doctrine of "Let us alone"—a doctrine which resulted

or tended to result in republicanism in politics and freedom of conscience in religion. All that is greatest and most glorious and most hopeful among ourselves, all that is peculiar to our institutions, whether secular or religious, comes from this doctrine of "Let us alone." It is a doctrine that meant, not idleness, not indifference, not heedlessness, not lawlessness, not the giving up of all responsibility for the wise direction of things, not an abandonment of moral control over unruly elements, not loosening of the reins to every license. It is a doctrine that meant work, activity, business, self-possession, self-respect, self-help, taking hold of things by the right handle, and regulating things according to rules of economy and justice. It meant, let the hounds loose upon their prey—the wolves and foxes that had been terrifying and ravaging society long enough. This was the doctrine of *laissez faire; let us alone*, and we will do our work, we will educate and cultivate and develop our own temporal and spiritual estates. But when an idler or a trifler gets hold of the doctrine, it means something very different from this. Then it means: Let matters take care of themselves, and go to the mischief, if they will, in their own fashion, or their own no-fashion; it means what democracy means to the vulgar, "Every man for himself, and the fiend take the hindmost."

But to come back to Ephraim. Ephraim was one of the ten tribes which, in a period of anarchy and misrule, had cast off its allegiance to the law of Jehovah, and been faithless to the sacred traditions and worship of the nation. No matter about him, says the prophet; no matter what becomes of him; leave him to follow his own course; do not meddle with him in the way either of enmity or friendship; let him alone.

What reasons the prophet might assign for letting Ephraim alone we can hardly conjecture. There may have been wise and good ones, which we should acquiesce in at once, if we knew all the circumstances of the

case. As we do not know them, we will not waste time in guessing at the prophet's thought, but will try to imagine some of the reasons which a politician might give for such a piece of advice.

1. In the first place, he would be likely to say, "Let Ephraim alone, because his idolatry is none of our business. The tribes are independent tribes, with independent possessions, and, to some extent, an independent government. If one of them chooses to separate himself from the rest, to set up an independent State, to adopt a new social system, to adore Baal and Astarte instead of the Lord God, that is his affair, not yours or mine." The very thing the English papers say to-day about Carolina and Mississippi; the very thing the Secessionist says; the very thing the idle Conservative says; the very thing the selfish citizen and neighbor and guardian and parent says, of the foolish, ignorant, vicious and abandoned people, who give themselves up to profligacy, immorality and irreligion. Let them alone; it is none of our business. If people choose to be ignorant and foolish and intemperate and suicidal, whose concern is it but their own? The argument, I repeat, of the thoughtless, the idle and the trifling. It is none of my business that a man makes varnish; but what if he sets up his factory in the rear of my residence? It is none of my business that a man does not choose to send his children to school, but lets them play about the streets; but what if his children entice mine to play with them, beset them on their way to school and tempt them to play truant, or waylay them as they come home from school, and teach them vagrant habits and vagrant vices? It is no business of mine that a man carries on his traffic on Sunday; but what if he carries it on in a way to insult and annoy pious people who wish the day for meditation and rest? It is no business of mine that a man believes and practises all the abominations of Mormonism; but what if he undertakes to

undermine the moral principles of society and break up the peace of homes and degrade human nature to the animal? Whatever concerns humanity, more or less immediately concerns me. We are all members of the same body, and if one of the members suffer, all the members suffer with it; if one is wounded, all bleed with it; if one is tainted, the poison affects them all. More than once, the rag of clothing from an infected ship has thrown a whole city into mourning. More than once, the "boiled grass" on which the people fed has cost the king his throne. More than once, the virus of moral disease, infused into some little remote vein of the finger or foot, has cost a State its life. He who refuses to be his brother's keeper stands in imminent danger of being his brother's victim. It is hardly true, then, to say that Ephraim's idolatry is his own affair, and that he may safely be left alone with it. Principles have a mysterious power of reproduction; actions propagate themselves; ideas and feelings spread by divine or infernal contagion, so that, for every falsehood and vice and sin in the world, every one of us is the worse, though not participating in it, nor so much as knowing of its character or its existence.

2. Again: it may be urged that Ephraim should be let alone because he is incorrigible, and all attempts to interfere with him would make him no better, and perhaps might make him worse. A very good reason this, when given by wisdom and nobleness and earnest interest in our brother's welfare; but how good is it when given by indolence and self-indulgence? Are we not all too ready to take for granted that our brother *is* incorrigible? that he has committed himself to his idolatry more completely than he has—that he has involved himself in vice more deeply than he actually has done—that his error is more studied, his crime more deliberate, his guilt more conscious, his wickedness more settled and purposed and malignant than it is?

For my part, I cannot believe that any man's fault is absolutely incorrigible ; if I could believe that, I should show but little faith in the Author of human nature ; for I should think it possible there might be a fatal flaw in the most perfect work of the all-perfect Creator ; I should disbelieve in the Infinite Power and Goodness ; I should disbelieve in the blessedness of the immortal life. When Jesus, speaking of one's duty towards an offending brother, says, Try on him your personal influence ; if this will not do, try the influence of friends ; if that fails, try what the Church can do ; and, all these failing, reckon him as an heathen man and a publican, I do not suppose him to authorize the *abandonment* of the man to his infirmity or sin as an incorrigible person. I understand him to direct that a new order of influences is to be brought to bear on him ; he is to be taken up at the beginning, as one who stands on the lowest level of humanity ; everything is to be done for him as for one who is wholly uninstructed and weak ; so far from being *let alone*, he is to be put back into the primary school of experience and tutored like a child. Did Jesus treat the heathen man or the publican as one with whom he had nothing to do ? On the contrary, he lavished upon him a more peculiar attention, and went very far out of his way to find him and reclaim him. We give our brothers up too easily. Parents give up their children, guardians their wards, teachers their pupils, neighbors their poor, citizens their paupers and vagrants, States their idiots, lunatics and criminals, nations their dangerous and perishing classes, much too easily. It is so much less trouble to let them alone ; so much less expense, too, at the moment, that letting alone soon passes for the best principle and the wisest policy, and we let our great resources of conviction and conversion slumber till they sleep their last sleep, while the evil they might have exterminated once swells and multiplies and establishes itself too firmly for any

human agency to remove it. That an evil seems to us incorrigible is, therefore, no good ground for letting it alone.

3. But once more: it may be said, if Ephraim is left to himself, he will, in time, put an end to his own offence. The idolatry to which he is joined is so miserable and debasing a thing, it corrupts its devotees so fast, it brings along with it so many abuses and turpitudes, it is associated with so much that is infamous and deadly, that it will do its own work full surely and full soon if permitted to run out into its ultimate consequences. It is too deeply infected with every element of corruption to live long, and, if allowed, it will stab itself with a more fatal weapon than you can wield against it. All this may be very true, but the objection to it is, that while evil does contain in itself the elements of its own defeat and decay, and will, in time, bring down its own destruction, these elements do their office very slowly; they take ages and ages to accomplish their providential mission, and they accomplish it at length at the expense of multitudes of most precious lives, of happiness by the heart full, the home full, the city full, of human order and security and peace to an incalculable extent. No doubt poor Ephraim's idol will prove itself a foul abomination one of these days; but by the time it does so, it will have been the death of poor Ephraim and a good many more less sinning than he. Do not leave it alone, therefore, if there is any hope that you may be able to stop it before it stops itself in this very deadly manner. Besides, do you wish Ephraim to be destroyed, and not saved rather? You do not let the suicide alone; why should you let the sinner alone? You do not let alone the man or woman who holds the pistol or the cup ready to put an end to a painful mortal existence; why let alone the man or woman who holds the vice or the folly or the guilt which is fast destroying the immortal soul? We

seize on the brink of the river the wretched girl whose shameful life is too bad to be borne any longer, and drag her back to the world she loathes; why not seize the moral suicide who, in killing himself, kills not only himself, not only his *eternal* self, but the divine selfhood, also, of men and women who are bound up in the same bundle of existence with him? It is hard to see why not. And so the third argument for letting Ephraim alone falls dead.

4. There yet remains one—this: that if well let alone, Ephraim will see the folly of his own courses, and like the prodigal in the parable, will return to his old home a penitent man. If you interfere with him, he may be vexed and angry; his vanity may be piqued; his pride may be wounded; he will, perhaps, persist in his evil career from sheer determination to have his own way, and will deliberately ruin himself in order to spite his unwise but well-meaning physicians. Let him alone, and he will discover his error for himself, and will have no hesitation in confessing it; meddle with him, and you put him upon a defence of his error. There is force in the suggestion. This is a point to be considered, no doubt; not, however, to be considered till it has been tried a little. For the simple fact is—and this, also, is a fact to be considered—that the more people sin, the less are they inclined, as a *rule*, to see the folly of it. The St. Augustines, who are saved by their sins, are exceedingly rare in history. The repentant prodigals are not so common that we may expect a fresh instalment of them every year, as the product of the open dram-shops and busy gambling-houses. Everything depends on this, whether the evil or the good in the system, the sickness or the health, is most powerful and the most active. If the first prevails, then no pains should be spared to increase the power of the second; if the second prevails, there can be no harm in assisting it, that its victory may be the quicker and the surer.

No one denies that there has been and is a vast deal of unwise interference with personal and social wickedness; interference that not only makes bad no better, but makes bad a good deal worse—meddling with infidelity, meddling with atheism, meddling with pauperism and intemperance and licentiousness; but the fault here lies in the *mode* of interference, not in the *principle* of it; the inference from the failure is not that the evil, whatever it be, shall be let alone, but that it shall be reached in other ways. One thing is most sure, that men are converted from *evil* only by force of *good;* that force may operate in one way or another—it may operate directly or indirectly—it may operate by way of cure or by way of prevention; but operate it *must*, and idleness, scepticism, trifling will never help it to operate at all, but will hinder and stop it forever and ever. No harm ever came from the general accumulation of character. No harm ever came from the cleansing of the moral atmosphere in which our souls live, and this interferes with all evils, large and small, as the sunshine interferes with marsh fevers, and as the free air of heaven interferes with all the diseases that flesh is heir to, without using a drop of medicine.

The *laissez faire* doctrine, rightly understood, does not mean, let evil things take care of themselves, but let them be taken care of by the unhampered, untrammelled, unrestricted powers of good. No evil thing ever, in appreciable time, diminished or took itself off through being let alone. Through being let alone, no evil thing ever did anything but grow and spread and magnify itself, and put down suckers like the banyan tree, till it became a vast forest of evil things. The old conflict between light and darkness never ceases for a moment; and one might as well say that the night air would cease to be unwholesome if the dawn would only cease to break, as that evil would become innoxious if good would

only go to sleep. There are those who tell us now, that all the woes that have come upon us in our civil war are the fruit of our meddling with the peculiar institution of the South; that if we had let slavery alone we should now be at peace. They charge the national trouble on the anti-slavery people of the North. They even go so far as to say that, if slavery had been let alone, it would have quietly disposed of itself, and hidden itself away among the things of the wicked past. They assure us that more than once it was gasping in the delirium of death, when an ill-timed friction and agitation gave new circulation to its blood, and stimulated it to new energy. Virginia, they declare, was thinking seriously of its abolition: Kentucky was tired of it, and was considering how it might be put away, when the teazing spirit of the Abolitionists stung it into fresh desperation, and goaded it into a feverish and obstinate struggle for new life. My friends, a very superficial knowledge of history will suffice to show how mistaken such an impression as this is, by showing that slavery languished, when it *did* languish, simply because it was unprofitable; and revived, when it *did* revive, simply because the invention of a cotton-gin had prodigiously stimulated the cotton culture and added enormously to the value of slave labor in the market. The institution did seem likely to die of starvation; it recovered and flourished because it received an abundant supply of food. This history teaches, plainly enough, to all who care to know it. And history, moreover, teaches this: that slavery never has been, to any considerable extent, interfered with, never to any extent that need cause its friends serious alarm. The *let-alone* policy has been very strictly pursued in regard to the institution. The Constitution has protected it from assault, the government has thrown over it its powerful shield: special laws have interposed between it and its assailants; the public

sentiment of the country has at least apologized for it, if it has not approved of it; the public sentiment of the North has never risen to the point of pronouncing it a sin, or even an evil, or so much as a mistake. No great party has ever declared itself its exterminator. The powerful classes in society have steadily justified and defended it, and deplored all criticism even of its character. The Abolitionists have been a small body of people, obscure in position, poor in material resources of money and influence, having no single commanding and widely circulated organ, repudiated, despised and spit upon by all who valued their good name in the world. All the great powers and interests and estates among us conspired to secure for the Southern institution a very complete and absolute letting alone. The Church let it alone, the political parties let it alone, the mercantile class let it alone, the capitalists let it alone. If it was approached, it was approached only to be flattered and courted; its rights were asserted with a vehemence that bordered on extravagance; its great staple of cotton was exalted above every product of the earth. Now, when we consider all this, is it not apparent that the "let-alone" policy, and not the "meddling" policy, is at the bottom of all our present troubles? Who is responsible for the insolence and arrogance that have struck so high a pitch in the last few months, for the overweening conceit of power, the extravagant assertion of privilege, the imperious and boastful temper, the wild expectations and visionary hopes, which have caused great States to rise in confident rebellion, and are luring whole communities towards certain destruction? Who, I repeat, is answerable for this? They who have done their little best to show the wrong and mischief of slavery, or they who have labored so successfully to defend it and vindicate it and shield it? Who encouraged these deluded and betrayed people to believe that an overwhelming majority at the North

would favor their uprising, and thus have aided the uprising? Certainly not those who refused to let slavery *alone*. For my own part, friends, let me say I have one pure consolation amid all the terrors of the time—it is, that I have done what I could with my small power, in my small way, and in my small sphere of influence, to strengthen the forces that bore against that bad institution. Many foolish words I have spoken in other connections, many weak words, many words I would gladly unsay, if I could, on other themes; but *these* words about the guilt of slavery I would rather repeat and multiply. Of them I am not ashamed. And when I stand at the last great bar, and am held to judgment for all the idle things I have spoken, I shall at least have the satisfaction of knowing that these, like the widow's two mites, will be accepted as a heart-offering to the cause of humanity; a cup of cold water to the little ones who thirsted in the hot Sahara of the world.

You see, my friends, that I do not believe in the doctrine of "Let us alone," as it is commonly understood. I believe in it only in the best sense, as meaning "Leave us free to attack evils and remove them; untie our hands, loose our tongues, emancipate our thoughts and speech, that we may bear down irresistibly upon evil and the evil man." It is in this sense that Jesus understands, accepts, and preaches the doctrine, when he says, "Resist not the evil man; but whosoever smites thee on the one cheek, turn to him the other." Surely Jesus could not by these words intend to take all restraint from wickedness, to remove all obstacles from its path, and leave it free to override goodness as it might choose. He meant, doubtless, to put surer restraint upon it, to throw heavier obstacles in its way, to make it incapable of overriding goodness at all. He meant to bind it as the fairies in the fine Northern Mythus bound the tameless wolf Fenrir with a chain made of the noise of the cat's footfall, the beards of

women, the roots of stones, the fishes' breath, and the spittle of birds. The chain was invisible and intangible, and the great beast knew not when it coiled about him. But it held motionless the creature whom the violent gods, with their iron cables, could not restrain. What Jesus says is this: Do not return the bad man's deed in *kind*. If he wrongs *you*, do not you wrong *him;* if he smites you with the *fist*, do not you smite back with the *fist;* if he steals your property, do you forbear to retaliate by stealing his; if he practises with dagger and poison, do not you practise with dagger and poison; if he shuts you up in prison for speaking your honest mind, and scourges you, and covers you with tar and feathers, do not be tempted to do likewise to him or his; if he slanders you, and lies about you, and calls you coward and "mud-sill," never retort on him his foul Billingsgate, but oppose patience to his fury, and let the gentle answer at once turn away the wrath and rebuke it. Christ says only, Do not try to beat the adversary at his own weapons. There are other weapons of finer edge and harder temper; try these; learning first of me how to use them. This is the way Paul puts it: "If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink." Why? That he may be made stronger to kill you? No, but because in so doing you kill him by heaping coals of fire on his head.

Were Jesus alive to-day, and the spokesman of the nation, would he say to Mr. Jefferson Davis, "You have smitten me on the right cheek, called Sumter; smite me now on the left cheek, called Pickens; you have taken from me the arsenals and mints and buildings, which were my cloak; take now, I pray you, the government offices and archives, which are my coat also; you have compelled me to walk out of your territory many a weary mile; say the word, and I am ready to walk twice the distance, even to walk out of the country altogther; you ask me for the city of

Washington; here it is at your service; you would 'borrow of me' the national treasury; behold the keys thereof at your command." Would Jesus say this? Not if he supposed that Mr. J. Davis would take him at his word. Not if he supposed that Mr. J. Davis would be so stubborn in his evil mind as to stand unrebuked and unshamed by this demonstration of magnanimity and divine patience. Not if he supposed that the moral force of such an attitude would prove utterly ineffectual to stay the impending ruin. He would say it, if he said it at all, simply with the purpose and intent of *resisting* Mr. Davis *more* effectually than arms would do it; of resisting him with the potency of *awe* and *shame* and *patience*. This was Christ's mode of resistance. A very mighty and prevailing mode it is, when one knows how to use it, and there are moral sentiments to use it upon; a mode of resistance which will come more and more into vogue as men become educated and Christianized; a mode of resistance which we all should understand and train ourselves in, and become proficients in the use of, for it is the mode of resistance which becomes the highest order of men and women, and is employed always by the angels and the blessed gods.

It is strange enough that Christ should be accused of preaching "non-resistance" to evil and evil men. Bring that charge against all the world rather than against him. For he is the only great Teacher who has ever preached an utter and uncompromising *resistance* to evil and evil men. *He* would never let the wicked alone. He did not leave the Pharisee alone in his pride, nor the Sadducee in his scorn, nor the lawyer in his craft, nor the priest in his cruelty; he sought the curst leper in the wilderness, the tormented sinner in his cave. The demons who had dragged their miserable victims out into waste places and among the solitudes of the tombs saw him coming, and cried out,

"Let us alone; what have we to do with thee?" But the Great Spirit went in among the very tombs, and cast the demons out, making them take refuge in the swine's flesh where they belonged. What Jesus did when alive, his religion has continued to do since his death. It is the only religion that has put wickedness fairly on the defensive and pushed it to the wall, and made it cry for quarter. It is the only religion that has made stubborn knees bend in prayer, and strong hearts break with penitence. It is the only religion that has made the robber baron give up his bloody plunder, and the robber king put off his bloody crown. It is the only religion that has unleashed the moral forces of man, and set them in full cry after the monsters of iniquity. The peculiarity of it is that it will not let wickedness alone, that it will give it no rest even in the grave, but pursues it with a terrible retribution into the shadows of another world, and scourges it through the long galleries of eternity. It puts a whip into the hands of every living conscience, with full commission to lash the rascals naked through the world, and when the world's barrier is past, it puts the same whip into the hands of the mighty angels whose mercy means restoration to goodness.

Bad men cry out to be *let alone.* Mr. Jefferson Davis, infested with evil spirits, cries out, "Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, spirit of justice and order and liberty and law?" No, Mr. Jefferson Davis; the high gods love thee too well to let thee alone. Thou shalt not be let alone. Though thou gain ever so many victories with thy chivalry, and drive the nation's goddess from her holy seat, and make for thyself a solitude of what was once a fair and fruitful land, thou shalt not be let alone. The spirit of justice and order and liberty and law will haunt thee; the convictions of the civilized world will encompass thee about on every side, will beset thee behind and before, will lay their hands

of iron upon thee; the laws of the universe will close in upon thee; angels and fiends shall provoke thee and cling to thee, until by pity or by terror thou art subdued.

Think not, because justice on an evil thing is sternly delayed, there is therefore no justice, or but an uncertain one, in this world. Think not, because the evil-minded goes free and joyous, and the pure-minded goes fettered and sad, that God is not, in his own way, dealing with them both. It is our blessedness to believe that the Holy Spirit of wisdom and love never leaves human sorrow or human sin alone, but is always working to console the one and eradicate the other. And if he does not do it all at once, it is because he works with such fine and subtle powers, not to invade our personality, but to refine and elevate and immortalize our being. It is our blessedness to think that he is with us in our sunshine and our shade, and will never let us go from the shadow of his awe or the sunshine of his bounty. Yea, O Lord, it is our blessedness to believe that thou hast searched us and known us, that thou knowest our down sitting and our uprising, and understandest our thought afar off. "Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. Whither shall I go from thy spirit, or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me."

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